

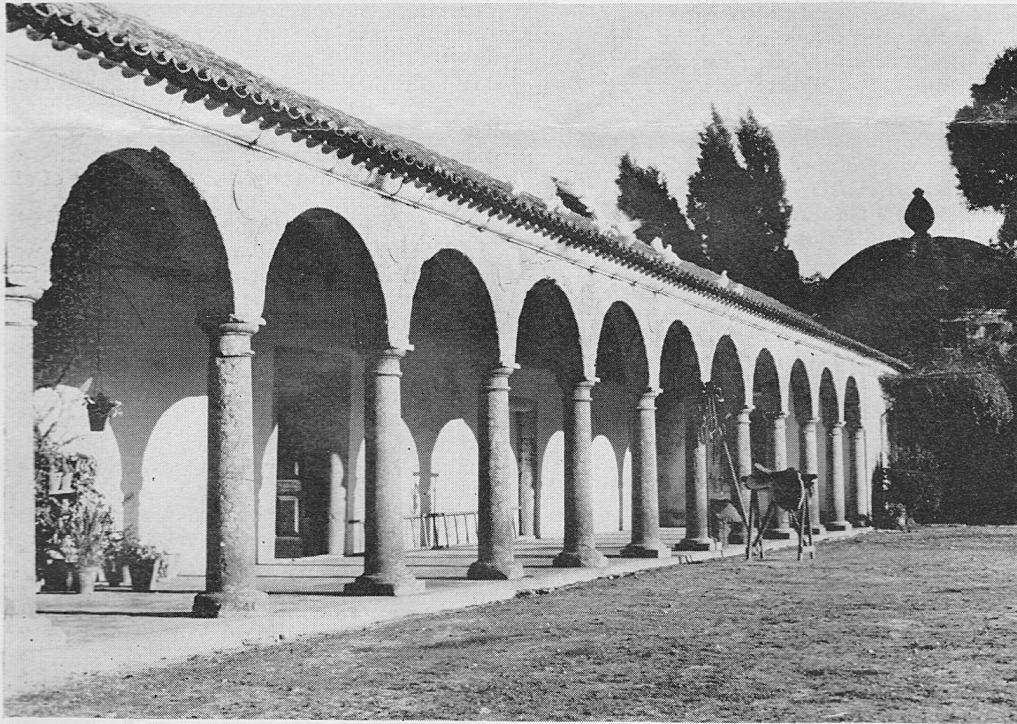
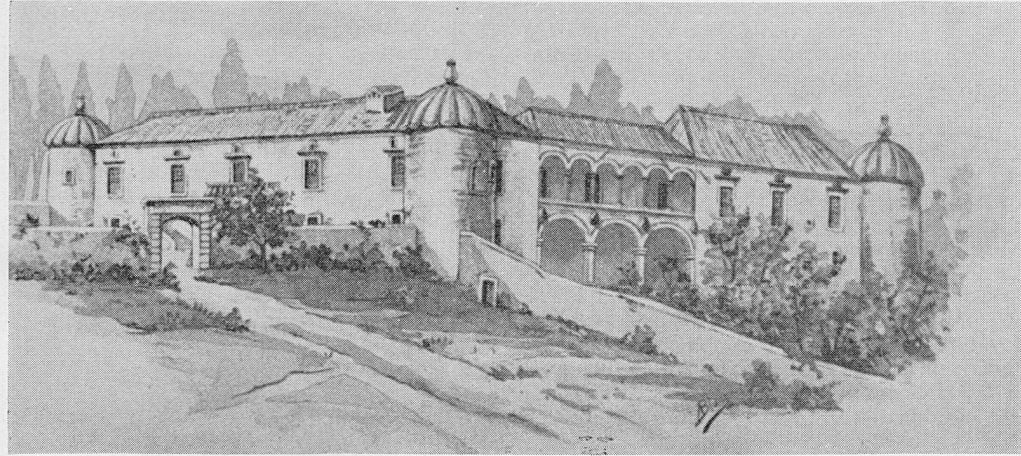
AN ANCIENT PALACE SOUTH OF LISBON

BACALHÔA, PORTUGAL

By PATRICIA MARTINEAU

ONE of the earliest surviving private houses of Portugal is a little gem in that enchanting country which lies between the rivers Tagus and Sado, immediately south of Lisbon. It is the Quinta Palacio da Bacalhôa, which, literally translated, means the Estate and Palace of the Codfish, though Bacalhôa is an antique word no longer in the dictionary.

The palace is mentioned in all the travel books written about Portugal since the war, but, fortunately for those who want to know about its hidden past, a Portuguese scholar called Joaquim Rasteiro wrote and published a book about it in 1895, and an artist called Blanc made drawings of it in 1898. Without Rasteiro's researches and recorded impressions almost nothing would be known today beyond the sort of legendary information that people



1.—A WATERCOLOUR OF BACALHÔA IN THE 1890s. With the aid of such sketches the present owner has been able to restore the palace. (Left) 2.—THE GALLERY FACING THE ENTRANCE QUADRANGLE

in the nearby countryside would have inherited. He has recorded the name and often much of the background history of every individual who has owned or possessed the palace for five centuries. He has also been able to describe with the aid of plans and water-colour sketches (Fig. 1) what the palace looked like, thus enabling the present owner, who bought it in the early 1930s, to restore it superbly. Bacalhôa is a palace rich in adornment, despite tragic periods of neglect that often gave rise to vandalism. It is shocking to realise how much has been removed since Rasteiro wrote his book some 70 years ago, already lamenting the losses suffered.

Although so much is known about Bacalhôa it is nevertheless an architectural mystery. King John I, 1385-1433, had a small estate with a hunting lodge at what is now called Vila Fresca de Azeitão. His son, a Master of the Knights Templar of Santiago, inherited the property, as in her turn did his daughter the Infanta Brites. Not only was she wealthy in her own right but she married the





4.—THE TOPIARY GARDEN FROM THE SOUTH LOGGIA. Beyond are the pavilions that overlook the swimming-pool

Duke of Viséu and Beja, the richest man in Portugal, and certainly had the means to build a royal palace. Brites died in 1506 after a long life, during which explorers finally reached India by the sea route. The wealth this produced enabled the élite of the day in Portugal to patronise the arts as never before.

In his search for perfection John II, 1481-95, asked Lorenzo de' Medici to send Italian masters to Portugal to teach local artists and leave samples of their work. Among those who came was Andrea Contucci, called Sansovino, the famous Renaissance sculptor and architect. He spent 14 years in Portugal, and left behind sculpture and buildings including, according to Vasari, "a splendid palace with four towers." There is a very old legend that he was referring to Bacalhôa, though there are no records in existence to prove it. This is not surprising, since the violent earthquake of 1755 destroyed many palaces and almost all the archives of Lisbon. Whoever he was, clearly the architect of Bacalhôa was familiar with the style of the Italian Renaissance.

The Infanta Brites adored her grandson Afonso and, when he married, promised that he should inherit Bacalhôa. However, he predeceased her and in 1506 the palace went to his daughter Brites de Lara, then only four years old. As an adult, she was beautiful and wealthy, but she took so little interest in Bacalhôa that she sold it in 1528 for 4,000 gold cruzeiros to Afonso de Albuquerque. He was the son of the second and greatest viceroy, who had seized Goa in 1510 and made it the centre of Portuguese dominion in the east.

Albuquerque was in the fleet that took the Infanta Brites de Lara to Savoy in 1521. During their stay from September to May the following year, the officers visited the principal cities and monuments of Italy. Rasteiro thought that these months inspired Albuquerque to reconstruct Bacalhôa from designs by an unknown Italian architect.

The estate had been entailed in 1568, but at his death in 1581 he had no children. Litigation was protracted, and not until 1609 was a final decision reached to award the palace to Maria de Mendonça and Albuquerque, whose husband Jeronymo Manuel was nicknamed Bacalhau, the Codfish, and it may be from a corruption of this word that Bacalhôa takes its name. This couple and their son, who inherited in 1620, took good care of Bacalhôa. However, after 1651 it was neglected by a succession of absentee landlords and incompetent administrators. One owner was attainted for treason, one was committed to a lunatic asylum, and at least two more lawsuits about inheritance followed. It was not until 1890, when the second Conde de Mesquitella inherited the palace, that it was cherished again. When Portugal became a Republic in 1910 the estate was sold and became an almost hopeless ruin through neglect.

A rare set of photographs taken by the present owner about 30 years ago shows what can happen to a building when abandoned for only a little more than 20 years after standing for over 400. Bacalhôa is in a district that normally experiences six months or more of continuous sunshine during the summer. This drought, which suits the vineyards, is offset in winter by several weeks of heavy rain. No doubt all the beams and rafters of the heavy tiled roofs were of old timber. At any rate, the entire south wing lay in a profusion of rubble and marble columns around the two main walls that remained standing. The roof on the north wing was holed, and could have been expected to deteriorate before long. The entire gallery opposite the main entrance with its 13 arches (Fig. 2) lay flat on the ground and the topiary garden (Fig. 4) was choked with grass.

Has Bacalhôa had a guardian angel in its long and chequered career? It has certainly had one for the last 30 years, for it has been brilliantly restored piece by piece, stone by stone. Not only does it look the same as when Rasteiro wrote about it 70 years ago, but, unlike most of the country palaces that survived the earthquake only to become public buildings or museums, Bacalhôa is still lived in. Every part of this little palace is furnished



5.—THE WEST LOGGIA. Its seven pillars are made of multi-coloured local marble



6.—AN OUTSIDE STAIRCASE ON THE EAST FRONT. The main entrance to the palace is on the first floor

in excellent taste, while the uses to which the numerous buildings within the towered walls are put are both charming and practical, as befits a palace and quinta combined. One can well imagine Albuquerque using the lovely pavilion on its sheet of water as it is used today, for relaxation in an unspoiled Renaissance setting. His Casa da India, 100 yards away, is still intact, although some of his collection of rare tiles and all of his pictures, some on canvas, of cities of India where his father was most famous, have disappeared from the upper floor during the present century. At the lower level, the Casa da India faces on to the orchard and vineyard, and the lower chamber now provides unseen but comfortable accommodation for two sleek Friesian cows that supply milk for the palace and the servants who live within the walls.

The palace is built in the shape of an L and consists of two floors only, with towers at the north, south and west corners. The cupolas of these towers are of a rare and most unusual melon shape, which is repeated in the smaller towers set in the extensive system of high walls surrounding the estate. There is no doubt that their origin is Moorish and not Indian.

Among the few examples still in existence are the cupolas above the little sentinel turrets in the Tower of Belem on the banks of the River Tagus in Lisbon, almost on the spot from which Vasco da Gama and others set off on their long voyages. It was built in about 1515 by Francisco de Arruda, who is known to have spent a long time in Morocco restoring fortifications, and who had evidently seen the melon-domed Koutoubia Mosque (13th century) at Marrakesh.

It is clear that except for the lower of the two loggias on the north side, the residential part of the palace was confined to the upper floor, the ceilings of which are very high, while all the windows, except in the towers, are full length. The ground-floor now contains kitchens, store rooms and the like. The legend that there was once a prison on this level is perhaps strengthened by the discovery during the last reconstruction of a mouldered purse of old silver and copper coins under the floor timbers. A fine outside staircase leads on the east front to the main entrance of the palace on the top floor, now scarred by the loss of many of its white marble balusters (Fig. 6). Above the main entrance is a niche containing a terracotta bust, which is thought to represent Afonso de Albuquerque.

The hall is spacious and well-proportioned (Fig. 7). To the left are several large bedrooms leading off each other and between them and the topiary garden is the lovely west loggia with its seven pillars of the unusual, multi-coloured local marble (Fig. 5) quarried in the 15th century in the Arrabida hills. These are closely similar in style to those of the upper

the gallery below. These are decorated in the spandrels by four heads in high relief projecting from circular medallions and are reputed to be of the first Infanta Brites, her husband the Duke of Viseu, her father the Infante John, and her mother the Infanta Isabel.

From the drawing-room runs a line of sitting-rooms overlooking the topiary garden

loggia on the north side, although the latter are cut from white quartz stone. Beyond the west loggia is the library which, but for the copse planted to shield the palace from the local bus depot on the other side of the main road, would overlook a downland of olive groves to the south (Fig. 3). The doorways on the other side of the hall lead to the dining- and drawing-rooms, the former containing a fine fireplace, at one time studded with jewels from the Indies. There is a medieval spiral staircase leading from the drawing-room to the floor below which is so narrow as to suggest that it was in use before Albuquerque rebuilt the palace. It leads to a small room with a massive carved wooden ceiling containing coloured armorial bearings.

The drawing-room stretches the full width of the north wing and two French windows lead to the upper of the two loggias overlooking the orchard and vineyard. Before the walnut trees shut out the view, Lisbon was clearly visible 25 miles to the north. The upper loggia has seven Doric pillars on a common base resting on four rectangular columns in



7.—THE MAIN ENTRANCE HALL

each of which has a spacious bedroom leading off it on the side overlooking the orchard. The towers all have different uses: the west tower contains a large circular marble bath sunk in the floor, the south tower houses a tiny chapel.

A very important feature of Bacalhôa is its decoration both inside and out with *azulejos* or glazed tiles. These are a feature of Portuguese decoration from the 15th century onwards and one of the most characteristic national expressions of art; more so than in Spain, from which the earliest tiles were imported. At Bacalhôa they outline skirtings, windows and doors. The west loggia walls are decorated in tiled panels of river gods, and the walls of the large staircase to the main entrance are faced with polychrome patterns of very early date. *Azulejos* are employed throughout the garden to decorate walls, benches and flower beds. During the centuries of rain



8.—THE PAVILIONS OVERLOOKING THE OLD IRRIGATION TANK, WHICH IS NOW USED AS A SWIMMING-POOL



9.—A TILED PANEL OF *SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS*, INSIDE ONE OF THE LAKESIDE PAVILIONS

and sunshine they have retained the most delicate colours fired on pottery, and the greatest threat to them is breakage. Perhaps the finest display of tiles at Bacalhôa is in the south-west corner of the main wall, where pavilions, topped by pyramidal roofs and connected with arcades, overlook a large square water tank which, though originally intended for irrigation as well as ornament, now also provides an excellent swimming-pool (Fig. 8). The pavilions suffered severely from vandalism and neglect, but are still superbly decorated with very early polychrome tiles (Fig. 10), some of which were identified by a German ceramics expert, Theodore Rogge, who worked with Rasteiro, as exactly similar to others he had examined in the Alcazar in Seville. Undamaged panels include *Susannah and the Elders* (Fig. 9), dated 1565 and regarded by some connoisseurs as the earliest dated panel in Portugal, and an escutcheon of the Albuquerquees.

The niches in the outside walls above the arcades are empty, though the terracotta statue of a woman which was originally in the centre has been removed for safety to the hall of the palace. It is about three feet in height, and in the left hand is a crown similar in design to that of the Holy Roman Emperor. Is there a link with Maximilian I, who revived this title and who was related to Queen Leonora of Portugal? In 1519, the year of his death, he presented a set of Portuguese primitive paintings to the Church of Jesus in Setubal, ten

miles away from Bacalhôa, which are today kept in the cloister museum.

Rasteiro gives a detailed description of a number of interesting things revealed by a fall of plaster from one of the towers on the north side. His eye-witness account suggests that probably a lot of the original 15th-century building may still be contained in the palace. There has always been conjecture about what traces still exist of this earlier period; the obvious examples are the four heads in the spandrels of the lower loggia (north side) and the spiral staircase near by. Regarding the former, G. Haydn Huntley in his work on Andrea Sansovino (1935) suggested that their style dates them many years after the death of the Infanta Brites in 1504, nor would he concede that the loggias were Florentine, but rather well into the 16th century. Rasteiro thought that the palace was designed in an epoch of transition, emerging as medieval in style modified by a Florentine influence, and characteristic of the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries. These and other experts have one conclusion in common: that the palace is a masterpiece.

Illustrations: Warren Martineau.



10.—LOOKING OUT OF ONE OF THE PAVILIONS